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NOTES ON THE ABORIGINES

OF

NEW SOUTH WALES:

BY

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WITH PERSONAL REMINISCENCES OF THE TRIBES
FORMERLY LIVING IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD OF SYDNEY
AND THE SURROUNDING DISTRICTS.



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Notes on the Aborigines of New South Wales

BY THE HON. RICHARD HILL, M.L.C.

WHEN the writer, a native of Sydney, was a young fellow, some sixty years ago, he remembers perfectly well that the aborigines used to assemble at intervals in large numbers, sometimes on very friendly terms, and at other times to settle, by fighting, difficulties arising, sometimes from murder, and perhaps oftener from the taking away of a "gin" (woman) by force, but in either case such misdeeds were never allowed to pass without punishment.

Sydney was looked upon as the central position, where at most times the blacks met to settle their grievances, and when a large meeting, 300 or 400, was to take place, regardless of the cause, whether it was to be a friendly "corroboree," which was a dance and thorough merry-making, or to adjust differences of a serious character, it was really surprising how the messages were set going from one tribe to the other as if by magic, even at long distances.

The "Cammaragals" were blacks belonging to the North Shore, and the district "Cammara," extended from the northern part of our harbour, say, from North Head to the Lane Cove River, or Estuary, right away north to the Hawkesbury, and away east to the sea-coast. This was a very powerful tribe, and the more so as it was often joined by the Parramatta, and sometimes by the Windsor and Richmond blacks, and although in near proximity to each other, the language differed a little, yet many words were alike, which enabled them to understand each other pretty well; but it was apparent to the whites who took an interest in these meetings that a difficulty in their language existed, and so with those that came from Liverpool, and the tribes of which extended down in one way along the southern shore of George's River away to Botany Heads, embracing "Nannunggurrung," now "Bottle Forest," down along the northern shore of Port Hacking to the coast, where they joined the well-known Botany blacks. At the two places they amounted to a pretty large number. I may say fairly that I have seen hundreds assemble on "Hyde Park" on more than one occasion, either to corroboree (dance) or for a man to "stand punishment." The culprit had to stand alone, about a hundred yards from the assembled mob, with nothing to defend himself with but a small piece of wood, sometimes bark (Heillamong) made thin, say, from 3 to 4 feet long, and about a foot wide in the centre, where a place was formed to put the hand in, and from the centre to each end it was tapered along the sides to a point, and the dexterity with which a man could defend himself against showers of spears was a marvel to those that witnessed it at various times, and it was a rare thing, indeed, if he did not defend himself successfully; but when a man was hit, either fatally or otherwise, his friend rushed in, which was a signal to stop the spear throwing, and in almost every instance, the row was ended after some fighting with waddies among the offended parties; but as night drew on most of them repaired to "Wullamulla," now Woolloomooloo, and fires were lit in all directions, and yarning and cracking jokes took place until nearly daylight. At this period

oysters, muscles, and fish were plentiful, which enabled them to get food without stint. Not so now; we have taken away nearly all that nature had given to them. Their fishing and hunting grounds are gone, and, by way of exchange, we have introduced into their midst, in its worst form, disease, to say nothing about intoxicating drinks, which have helped in a large degree to kill them out. But happily, as a last resource, mission stations have been formed, and an Aboriginal Protectorate Board has been established in Sydney to attend to the wants of these poor people; and to do this, a large grant of several thousands annually is voted by Parliament.

It was the writer's habit, even up to a very recent date, to spend weeks at a time fishing, shooting, and kangarooing, which enables him to say that a blackfellow in his way, as a rule, is very clever, and if properly managed is always the life and soul of the party, full of humour, an excellent mimic, and with the mutting (four-pronged spear) are not easily surpassed as fishermen, and in the bush hunting he has no superior; untiring, and always first to see the game. When our hunting has extended over a large area of several miles, and kangaroos are caught, especially in the morning, they are hung up on trees to be picked up on our way to the camp; then it is something wonderful to see how, apparently without an effort, the blacks go from tree to tree, even though miles separate them, to get the game, and when they reach the camp, mostly tired and sore-footed, after some tea, something to eat, a glass of grog, their humour and fun, or rather tone of talk, begins. In fact, if you will talk with them, they will keep it up to a very late hour; but when morning (daylight) comes, they are the most difficult beings in the world to rouse; but when once up, as I said before, they are the life and soul of the party, if in good hands.

Their habits are pretty nearly the same from one end of the country to the other, of a migratory character, never long in one place, owing perhaps to this fact, that having to find their own food they are compelled to move on from place to place, mostly confining themselves to their own district.

A blackfellow never thinks of to-morrow. If you give him in the shape of food as much as should last him two days, he will consume it in one, if possible, and trust to chance for the next. In almost every instance they are kind and affectionate to their children and most indulgent. In the early days in the districts to which I have alluded hundreds were to be found, but nearly all are dead—certainly not a Botany aborigine is now living; and I may say the same of Sydney, Cammeray, Parramatta, or Liverpool—all are gone, and drink has been the principal cause!

BY THE HON. GEORGE THORNTON, M.L.C.

WHEN the continent of Australia was first taken possession of by the British the aborigines were very numerous, especially along the eastern coast (New South Wales), which was for a long time the only part populated by Europeans. At that time the natives were physically a superior race to what they are at present, the men being robust and muscular, and the women being exceedingly well formed and good looking. The average height of the men then was about 5 feet 10 inches; and, as stated before, they were excellently proportioned, as also were the females. I refer especially to the aborigines who then inhabited the coast to as far north as Point Danger.

Being a native of the Colony, I have been familiar with the native blacks and their customs from childhood, and from my own observation can assert that

they are possessed of great natural intelligence, and their power of sight and hearing is phenomenal. Their ability to track a person, even over the surface of a rock, is too well known to need any reference to it here.

In their primitive state they were more than gallant, they were chivalrous, in their sense of natural and mutual duties. In the case of an offence which infringed their laws relating to the protection of their females, the culprit was punished in the following manner:—He was placed by himself, away from any cover, and a band of the most expert spearmen of the tribe stood at a distance of sixty to a hundred yards; at a given signal, the latter threw their weapons at the law-breaker, at exactly the same moment, and if he managed to evade the spears his life was spared; this, however, as may be imagined, was a matter of extreme difficulty.

No doubt, like all uncivilised races, the Australian aborigines have all the cunning and selfishness which is inseparable from a primitive state, but from Gabo Island to Point Danger (which is as far as my knowledge extends) I have found them to be bold and spirited, and generally speaking they have pleasing countenances, and my opinion of them is that they are not, as is asserted, lazy and good for nothing. As an instance of their chivalry and courage, I may mention a custom which prevailed among them:—When two men, for any reason, agreed to fight “to the death,” came together, each would invite the other to strike first, in fact, the orthodox greeting or signal in matters of this kind was “hit me first,” each, at the same time, offering his head to be struck. A well-known historical instance of their bravery may be gathered from the well-known anecdote referring to their stubborn resistance to Governor Phillip at a place in Sydney Harbour, the native name of which was “Kayeemy”; as the boat approached the shore the natives rushed into the water up to their necks to try and prevent the party from landing, but Governor Phillip persisting, one of the natives, named “Willemerung,” threw a spear, which pierced the Governor’s back. To commemorate the event, and appreciating this display of courage and determination, Governor Phillip called the place “Manly.” As before stated, the spot where the spear was thrown was called in the native tongue “Kayeemy,” but the aboriginal name of Manly proper was “Cannae.”

The aboriginal race have no idea of a Supreme Being, and, in my opinion, are not susceptible of religious impression, but have a strong universal belief in evil spirits. Though the belief in these spirits is general, each district or tribe has its own particular theory as to the shape in which the dreaded phantom appears. In every instance, however, the blacks believe that the aim of these “Devil Devils” (which is the anglicised term) is destruction to those unfortunates who happen to fall in their way. The evil spirit of the Sydney, Botany, and southern district, including Port Hacking, was called by the natives of that tract of country “Booubolong,” and their belief was that it was represented by a very little man, a dwarf in fact, who prowled about at night, and was impervious to shot, ball, spear, or, in fact, any weapon. There was, however, a chance of escape for the unhappy creature who encountered this demon; if he knew a certain password, he was let go, but if not he (or she) would be devoured. The belief was that when the “Devil Devil” met a black, the latter would be accosted as follows, in the native tongue—“Name your mother”; if the answer were immediately given, “Boonbolong,” the native was to liberty to depart, but failing to give the password would be devoured. The evil spirit in the Newcastle and Port Stephens districts was called “Koen,” and was represented as being an

animal very much like a camel, but much larger. Their theory was that this "Devil Devil" would devour any blackfellow whom he found asleep, in the same manner as "Boonbolong."

Not all the philosophy in the world (in my opinion) will ever dispossess the aboriginal mind of the idea of evil spirits, nor do they seem able to grasp the doctrine of a Supreme Being. They are firm believers in the doctrine of Metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, and have a firm conviction that a chatterer, whether man or woman, will reappear on this earth as a laughing-jackass, a sly sneaking fellow will be a "Warrigal," or native dog, and so on, the animal that the soul reinhabits corresponding with the nature of the person; for instance, a savage spiteful man would reappear as an eaglehawk.

The natives all over the continent, at the time the first white people arrived for the purposes of settlement, were subject to a disease resembling small-pox; the native name of this disease was "Galgala," and it was known to the early settlers as "Native Pock." Most of the aborigines, especially the men, were subject to this malady, which left "pock marks" on the cheeks, and on the nose. The English small-pox, which was introduced among the natives in the early days of the Colony, carried off hundreds of them. At North Shore, Botany, and other places wherever it had spread, their bodies were found years afterwards in scores, especially along the coast.

Their strength and muscular power, to which I have alluded before, I attribute to the nature of the food in use along the coast by the aborigines, such as fish, oysters, mussels, kangaroos, opossums, and abundance of game, which was to be found at that time along the coast, and on which the aborigines subsisted for some fifty years after the colonisation of the country. It is worthy of mention that no aboriginal native will eat an oyster uncooked, and I myself share their opinion that a raw oyster is most indigestible, despite what medical men may say to the contrary. About fifty years ago I asked one of the natives of the Port Stephens district why they roasted the oysters before eating, and told him they were good eaten raw, at the same time asking him to open some for me. "No, master," was the reply, "if we eat them that way, give sore here" (at the same time pointing to his abdomen). At several places along the coast there are to be found piles of oyster-shells, which have been roasted; these are, I dare say, the accumulations of perhaps centuries. In many instances these piles or heaps are as much as 50 feet deep.

They were extremely skilful in throwing the spear, being capable of killing kangaroos, &c., at very great distances. They also had two or three sorts of "Boomerangs"; one for amusement, known in their own language as the "Come-back" boomerang; another for warlike purposes, which was cut a slightly different shape from the "Come-back"; and also a third variety, for killing game, or anything that ran along the ground. They caught their fish with the aid of a spear called a "Mutting," which had four prongs, pointed with fish-bones, and made fast with a gum which exudes from the grass-tree. They sallied forth for the purpose of catching fish at night, armed with the "Mutting" and a torch. As is well known, fish are attracted to a light, and as they swam towards the light thrown by the torch the natives struck them with the "Mutting," capturing great numbers in this manner. The spear is generally made from the common "bulrush," or grass-tree.

As a general rule, the blacks are very affectionate, exhibiting extreme fondness for their families. Polygamy existed, and does exist, all over the continent, a man not being restricted to one wife; if he were able to feed two or three, he was at perfect liberty to have that number, and families of this description lived in perfect unity.

A well-known personage, in the time of Governor Macquarie, was "Bungaree." He was recognised as the king of the tribe inhabiting the Sydney and surrounding district, and as such Governor Macquarie, on the king's birthday, used to decorate old "Bungaree" with his (the Governor's) cast-off uniform, red coat, with epaulettes, &c., and Bungaree, arrayed in this costume (with the exception of the trousers, which he could not be induced to wear), was a well-known figure in the streets of Sydney, clothed in the Vice-regal dress, including the cocked hat, but minus trousers and boots. The name of "Bungaree" has since become common, steamers, &c., being so called; but this king (who was a native of Brisbane Water) was the original. The blacks, as stated elsewhere, are naturally mimics, and this "Bungaree" could imitate the Governor and several of the principal officers, marvellously well.

Each tribe had what they called a "Carradygan," or native doctor, who used to prescribe for them in sickness, and attended to matters of wounds and fractures, in some instances very skilfully. The medicines given by them were in most cases prepared from herbs, and generally proved efficacious. These doctors, in return for their services, were allowed special privileges in their tribe, in consideration of their always holding themselves ready to treat the sick and wounded.

The first civilised black that we have any record of, and who was taken great notice of by Governor Phillip, was named "Benilong." The Governor gave him a little hut to live in, and supplied him and his wives with food, fishing tackle, &c. The place was called "Toobergoola," and was situated in that part of Sydney Cove where the North Shore horse boats now start from; but the name of "Toobergoola" also applied to the point itself, which is now known as Fort Macquarie. The name of Benilong's wife was "Barangaroo."

The Governor used, some years ago, to give the natives an annual feast at Parramatta, all the natives of the districts attending, and they were treated to a really substantial repast. I was present at some of these feasts.

I may mention here, in support of my opinion as to the intelligence of the blacks, that they have particular names for, and can distinguish certain colours—black, white, red, &c.

In some parts of the continent, circumcision is practised, mainly, I think, on sanitary grounds, as it is mostly in the hotter regions that this is performed.

With regard to the language of the aborigines, although, in my opinion, it has sprung from the one root, each tribe has its own particular dialect, which dialect generally extends over a space of about one degree of latitude or longitude; so that the language of one tribe will be quite different to that of a tribe at a distance of perhaps a few miles. The language of the aborigines is divided into two classes, one extending nearly over the whole of the continent, and is called the "Kamloroi," the other is called "Weradgery." These are the bases of the native language of Australia. As stated before, these are divided into various tribal tongues, which, although almost entirely different from one another, have, in some instances, words bearing a common meaning. As an example of this similarity, I will quote a few words from the dialects of the natives inhabiting the Port Stephens district and the district adjacent to Sydney respectively. In the dialect of the Port Stephens district the sun is called "Wingun"; the moon, "Gheewong"; a wild duck, "Berrumma"; a large kangaroo, "Wapera." The Sydney district aborigines' terms for the above are—the sun, "Euroka," or "Koen"; the moon, "Yanala"; a wild duck is "Urani"; a large kangaroo, "Butti-gorang." These few instances show the difference between the languages

at places not sixty miles apart. When I mention Sydney district I mean as far south as Botany. As a still further and stronger proof that all these languages have risen from a common root, I may state that the native numbers are almost identical. The Port Stephens district terms for one and two respectively, are "Wogul" and "Bulla"; for three they say "Wogul bulla"; and for four, "Bulla bulla." The natives in the neighbourhood of Sydney designate one, two, three, and four as "Wogul," "Bulla" or "Yallowe," "Boorooi," and "Callinalong." Beyond four they cannot go, expressing large numbers by means of their fingers, as for instance, ten would be represented by holding up both hands with the digits extended. This is not only an illustration of their mode of reckoning, but, as stated before, proves conclusively to my mind that the original basis of all these languages was the same. It is worthy of note that nearly all native names have some special significance, for example, the word "Parramatta"—the original capital and seat of Government of New South Wales—is derived from "Parra," an eel—"Matta," "this place," signifying "Eels here." The disputed word now called "Woolloomooloo" was originally "Wulla Mulla," and I have an indistinct recollection that it meant a burial-ground or place of interment. Many well-known colonial names of towns, &c., are corruptions of old aboriginal words, such as "Wagga Wagga." The native name for a crow is "Worgan," and when the natives wished to express that there are great numbers of any certain thing they repeat the word twice; where the town of Wagga Wagga now stands was designated by the natives "Worgan Worgan," on account of the enormous number of crows to be found there. The bullock drivers and others rendered this "Worga Worga," and it gradually became changed to its present appellation of Wagga Wagga. With respect to the word "Tocal," the name of an estate on the Paterson River, this was so called as it was celebrated for the number of ducks to be found on the swamps there, and was for this reason called by the natives "Tocal," meaning plenty or abundance. Brewarrina, a well-known town of New South Wales means the fishery or place to fish. The name of "Coogee" (a watering place near Sydney) is a corruption, and ought not to have been kept up; it is derived from "Coojah," meaning bad smell, and received its name in the following manner:—At a certain season of the year a kind of weed is blown or washed ashore, and as it dries in the sun a most unpleasant odour is emitted, the blackfellows' name for such an odour or stench is "Coojah or Koojah," and this in time gone by was used by the natives in referring to that particular place. Most of the names of places along the coast of New South Wales are corruptions of native words, and fall far short of their original beauty. For example, there are Wollongong, Kiama, and Ulladulla. Wollongong should be "Wolyungah," which means a place where fish may be caught with hook and line. Kiama should be "Kiari Mai," signifying a fertile district. The correct native name of Ulladulla should be "Wooloodorr," meaning a harbour of refuge. "Elouëra" is what Illawarra is derived from, and means fine country.

The native name of the wild-fig is "Cooroowul." The aboriginal name of the waratah is "Mewah," and the gigantic lily is called by the natives "Gomea."

With respect to the word "Kangaroo," this is undoubtedly an aboriginal name give by the natives to that well-known animal, the same being noticed and chronicled by Captain Cook in the accounts of his early voyages. In my opinion, despite what may be said to the contrary, this is the true aboriginal name of the animal, as may be found in Captain Cook's records.

The native name of the country lying between Longnose Point, Balmain, and South Head was "Caddie," and the aboriginal term for a tribe or clan being at that time "Gal," the tribe inhabiting that stretch of country between the points named were called "Caddie Gal." The native name of North Head was "Borec"; Pinchgut Island was called in the native tongue "Mattiwunye"; Middle Head was "Cubba Cubba," and Sydney Cove, "Warrane." The native name of Goat Island was "Memel," and North Shore was called "Cammeray." It was inhabited by a tribe of powerful and fighting blacks, who were nearly always victorious; they were known as "Cammeray-gal." There was another tribe a little west or opposite Sydney Cove; these were called "Walumetta." The tribes west of that, and between them and Parramatta, were called "Wanne" and "Wangal," and lived between Walumetta and up to Parramatta.

The names of some of the old blacks well known in the Sydney district are given hereafter:—"Boorong" was the first aboriginal girl civilised (in 1790); "Coleby" was the name of another civilised black in the very early days; "Balladery" was an aborigine well known in Sydney in 1790. The tribe of blacks between Parramatta and the Hawkesbury was called "Buruberongal." "Meroot" and his wife, "Grang Grang," were the parents of "Boson," a civilised black well known in Botany many years ago. "Meroot" was killed in Sydney by a black named "Blui," and was buried near Rushcutters' Bay, exactly where Mr. John Williams' (late Crown Solicitor) house stands. "Yaranabi" was the King of the Darling Point tribe at that time. Another chief of a tribe a little south of Coogee was called "Maroobera," and the beach is still called so after him. "Pemullaway" was the chief of the Botany tribe, and "Nambarre" was a native boy of Botany. The native name of the south head of Botany was "Kundull," which has been corrupted to Kurnel. The north head was "Bunnabi." The tribe of blacks inhabiting that region, and extending a little to the north and south, were called "Gweagal." The name of a native girl well known at Parramatta was "Bedia Bedia." One of the old blacks was called "Balladeery." An old Sydney aborigine named "Krooi" had his camp at the point known as "Lady Macquarie's Point," the N.E. end of the present Botanical Gardens. He used to fish from a small detached rock a few feet distant from the N.E. part of the point. It was known as "Krooi's Rock."

The native name of the cockatoo is "Warrianbah."

In every tribe there was a wit, and it was a recognised and orthodox fact that whatever this wit said or did was to be accepted as being humorous, and their etiquette required that such should be laughed at. As a general rule, however, this person was witty.

Their idea of divorce is very primitive and exceedingly simple. If they are tired of their wives they tell them to go, as they wish to have some one else; the woman being a mere slave is forced to consent, and she is then at liberty to have another husband. But for all this, the husbands are as a general rule fond of their wives, and the wives loyal and affectionate to their husbands.

A remarkable superstition of the aborigines is that when a blackfellow is dead it is wrong to even mention his name; they believe this to be forbidden, and are as firm in this belief as we are taught to be in the belief of our common Christianity.

The blacks have a great love of song, and a very good idea of tune and time, in fact, on special occasions, they have festivals of music. For instance, when one tribe visits another, the receiving tribe treats its guests to what might be called a "new opera," and at such times, where different

animals are sought to be imitated, the natives go to great trouble to make the resemblance as perfect as possible, when imitations of kangaroos are attempted they even fix on false tails, and the same trouble is taken in presenting likenesses of other animals, much to the interest and amusement of their visitors. They practise their songs, and it is considered a great accomplishment to be able to sing. I have never been able to gather from their songs whether it is really words that are pronounced, and have asked them, but they do not seem to know themselves what the songs mean, in fact, it is a sort of gibberish sung to a particular melody. I have tried to show them that in our songs there is a sentiment, but have come to the conclusion from their replies that the words of their songs correspond to choruses, such as "tooral-ooral," &c., in our own language, but are sung to the gratification and amusement of themselves. These songs are brought from tribe to tribe sometimes seven days' journey from one another. They are very tuneful and pleasing, and the blacks themselves are severe critics of their own particular style. No mistake of even a note in the cadence must be made, or the performer will be put out. The blacks at Albany (West Australia), who are inferior in intelligence to those inhabiting the east coast, laughed at the songs which are described to them as being sung by natives in this part of the continent. Their songs have nothing in common with those peculiar to the east coast, either in tune or action, the only similarity being that the language has originally been the same—derived from the same root. It is evident that the blacks of Van Diemen's Land are a distinct race from those inhabiting the continent of Australia, the former having curly "negro" hair, and the latter possessing smooth wavy locks; besides, the features of the two races are not at all identical, thus indicating a different origin, but this point I leave to someone else to theorise on, and also to determine from whence these races originally came.

A ceremony which is common among all tribes is that of conferring on youths the title of manhood, and this is called at any rate in the Sydney district "Yoolangh." This ceremony, after the early discovery of the Colony, used to take place at that place which is now called Farm Cove, and the candidates were brought from all the surrounding districts, the several tribes being informed that on a certain day this rite would be performed. The ceremony, which gave to youths all the privileges of manhood, consisted of knocking out the front tooth with a piece of stone; when that was done the young man was entitled to seek a wife, but no matter what his age might be, until this ordeal was gone through he was treated as a boy, and was under subjection to his parents. This course of initiation was gone through with an almost religious solemnity, and corresponds in its importance among the aboriginal race with the ceremony of circumcision in the Jewish nation. A very important feature of their ceremonies is to paint themselves, which is done with white pipeclay and red ochre. On some occasions this painting is a symbol of grief for the loss of a relative; sometimes, when they are going to war, and on such occasions they strive to make themselves as hideous as possible, trying to appear, as nearly as they can, like skeletons, marking white ribs on their bodies.

When the ceremony mentioned above, viz., "Yoolangh," takes place, there are generally songs and other performances and feasting.

The aboriginal name of Newcastle is "Moolabinba."

